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Martin Luther was born in the year 1483 in a little town called Eisleben in Germany to parents Hans and Margaret Luther. He was one of five sons born to this couple, but two of these sons died. Luther was the first born son, and as all well-intended, intelligent parents do, they planned out his entire life for him. After all, children are to obey their parents and follow their every command, right? Right. That worked about as well back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century as it does today.

Luther's parents wanted him to be a lawyer, because he would be rich, he would marry well, and he would provide them with many spoiled and chubby grandchildren. And so they paid for Luther's education, who was incredibly smart. Luther flew through grammar school (which was about the time Columbus set sail for America, just to put all this in a greater context). He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in the shortest time possible and seemed to be well on his way to a lucrative career in law, which pleased his parents very much.

Until one day, in 1505, as Luther was walking to law school, a terrible thunderstorm struck the woods through which he was walking. With lightning striking all around, a terrified Luther cried out to God, promising that if God spared his life, he would renounce his secular career and become a monk. The raging storm subsided, and Luther, a man of his word, marched into his parents' house and informed them of his sudden change in career. They, of course, had a fit. After all, they had just paid for his extensive education, not to mention the fact that as opposed to lawyers, monks live lives of poverty. His choice of monasticism also dashed their hopes of him producing many spoiled and chubby grandchildren. They were crushed.

Nonetheless, Luther was determined to be a monk, and so he sold his books and entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt on July 17, 1505. He spent the next two years fasting, praying, and confessing. He did all the things monks did which were supposed to draw you closer to Jesus. He seemed sad, though, his superior noticed. Luther himself wrote that in those first years he "lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made him the jailor and hangman of my poor soul." He was ordained as a priest in 1507 and offered the position of professor of theology at the newly founded University of Wittenberg, which he accepted. Within 5 years, while teaching, he earned two bachelor's degrees and a doctorate degree. The university faculty awarded him the honorary title Doctor of the Bible...and still his parents were disappointed in and furious with him.

Over time, the more Luther studied the Bible, the more agitated he became, torn between what the Bible actually said and what the church was teaching it said, not that the people would know the difference, since no one had their own copy of the Bible, and even if they did, it would be in Greek, Hebrew or Latin, which they didn't speak and when they went to church the priests told them their version of what the Bible said, but the priests preached in Latin, which the people didn't understand anyway, so the priests could say whatever they wanted, which they did.

Anyway, Luther became increasingly aware of the horrible abuses the church was carrying out...for example, when Luther first started teaching theology, Michaelangelo began painting the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome, and Luther learned that the church was beginning a huge stewardship campaign to begin the construction of St.

Peter's Basilica. He discovered that the church was selling things called "indulgences," which were slips of paper, like coupons, which bought time out of purgatory for the people's beloved friends and family who had already died. Kind of like the *Get Out of Jail Free* cards in Monopoly, indulgences shaved time off your sentence in this fabricated place of limbo between heaven and hell. In a nutshell, the church was selling tickets to heaven. Luther was outraged. Something had to be done.

And so Luther wrote up a list of 95 charges he had against the church and nailed it to the door of the church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517...he chose this date because the following day was All Saints' Day, and the church would be packed full of people shelling out cash to buy tickets to get their dead moms and dads and grandmas and grandpas out of purgatory and into heaven. This date marks the beginning of what history would later call The Reformation...it is the day when the first crack appeared in the medieval Roman Catholic Church, which would eventually split into Catholicism and Protestantism, those who were protesting against the Catholic church, many of whom eventually came to be called Lutherans, named after Martin Luther, of which we are a part.

Luther continued to write books and treatises against the Catholic church, which spread like wildfire, because, as luck would have it, Guttenberg's printing press was just invented. Eventually, Luther was in so much trouble with the church that he was summoned to appear before a council in the city of Worms, to be interrogated by Emperor Charles V and Pope Leo X. They demanded that he take back everything that he had said, done and written against the church. Luther refused to take it back. The gavel came down. He was now cut off from the church forever, and was declared an outlaw. It was publicly decreed illegal for anyone to give Luther food or shelter, and anyone could kill him, without legal consequence. He was declared a heretic and was called a demon who only looked like a man. He came back with the remark that the Pope had been excreted from the bottom of Satan. That didn't help his current situation.

One night, while walking in the dark, Luther was kidnapped by his friends and taken to the Wartburg Castle in the nearby city of Eisenach. For two years, he was kept safely hidden in the castle, where he translated both the Old and New Testaments into German, the language of the people, and sneaked his translations out so that they could be printed and distributed among the people for them to read themselves. He translated at an astonishing rate of 1500 words a day!

Finally, a restless Luther left the castle to resume his work among the people. He found Germany in total upheaval. During his absence, there had been uprisings and revolts, and thousands of people had died because of these disputes between the Catholics and the Lutherans, as they were now becoming called. It was a shocking and horrific sight for Luther after two years of silent seclusion.

God answered Luther's dark mood by introducing him to a woman named Katherine von Bora, who was one of twelve nuns Luther helped sneak out of a Cistercian convent. He wrote to his friend, "Suddenly, while I was occupied with far distant thoughts, the Lord has plunged me into marriage." Luther was a monk and Katy was a nun—their marriage was the last straw...this was an evil union between Satan and a whore, the church said, and their children would certainly be the spawn of Satan. The married and bore six children, two of whom died in Luther's arms. But finally, Luther's parents got their wish granted of having grandchildren, and they were thrilled.

For the next years, Luther busied himself with organizing a new church, one based on scripture alone, one that spoke to the people in their own language, including hymns, which he translated into German and set to the tunes of popular beer-drinking songs. He wrote the Catechisms, the Large one for clergy to learn the basics about the teachings of the church, and the Small one for parents to take home to teach their children about the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Apostle's Creed, and the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

He went round preaching to congregations that God does not love us based on how many good things we do or how much money we give to the church, but God loves us because he are his children...and that God loves us unconditionally, when we're naughty as well as when we're nice, God loves the sinner in us as much as he loves the saint in us. He taught that there is salvation outside the church, that it is finally God's decision to *love* people and God's desire to open the doors of his kingdom to *all* people.

On the evening of February 17, 1546, Luther experienced chest pains. He went to bed and awoke in the middle of the night, because the pains had grown much sharper. His companions came to his side, along with Katy, and asked him, "Reverend father, are you ready to die?" He replied, "Yes." An hour later he died, aged 62. He was buried under the pulpit of the church in Wittenberg where he had preached countless sermons.

Ultimately, ***Luther's gift to the church was to teach us about freedom, not necessarily from the pope, but from ourselves.*** He was his own worst enemy and suffered from terrible self-esteem, like everybody else. Luther figured out that the reason we can't believe that God can possibly love our neighbor is because we finally don't believe that God can love *us*. He spent his life unfolding passages from the Bible that contradict that, assuring himself and us, even more than 500 years later, that God's love for us does not depend on our goodness or our worthiness, that God's love is unlike anything we've ever experienced before...it is unconditional, unending, unwavering...

Ironically, the last thing Luther ever wrote, after authoring hundreds of books, treatises, sermons, articles, lectures and commentaries, was scribbled on a tiny slip of paper and found by his bedside after he died. He had written, "We are all beggars, it's true." All of us stand at the foot of the cross of Christ—peasants and kings, popes and emperors, slaves and princes, children and adults, sinners and saints—all of us, with hands outstretched, begging for a small cup of water, a small gesture of mercy...and God answers with a flood, a baptism which pours over all of us beggars, and we are washed clean, all of us.